

The Mississippi Bar's to Assist



On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina's 140 mph winds and 25-foot storm surge struck the Mississippi Gulf Coast and affected the practice of law for almost 900 lawyers who lived and maintained offices in the three Coast counties hardest hit—Hancock, Harrison and Jackson Counties. Many lawyers lost their offices and everything in them in the ten cities of Waveland, Bay St Louis, Pass Christian, Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi, Ocean Springs, Gautier, Moss Point and Pascagoula.

State and federal courts on the Coast closed for Katrina and have not reopened to date. The justice system is presently at a standstill. Commerce is minimum at best. To ensure that commerce will be restored to any semblance of normalcy, coast lawyers will need to be available for the many legal issues that have and will continue to arise out of Katrina. Clients who had legal issues prior to Katrina still have those issues and some will have potentially greater issues in the aftermath.

After the restoration of power at the Mississippi Bar Center two days after Katrina hit Mississippi, The Mississippi Bar began the task of implementing Katrina Relief Efforts for Lawyers to help its displaced members through the following:

Lawyers Relief Fund

Immediately following Hurricane Katrina The Mississippi Bar and Mississippi Bar Foundation created the Katrina Lawyer Relief Fund to assist Mississippi lawyers impacted by Katrina. The purpose of the fund is to provide assistance to lawyers and law firms whose offices were destroyed or severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina. The goal being to assist those attorneys in the restoration of their law practices. Lawyers and Bar Associations from all over the State and Nation have contributed generously to this fund. Approximately 900 lawyers resided in the 3 coastal counties devastated by Katrina. The Bar and Bar Foundation working with the officers of the Hancock, Harrison and Jackson County Bar Associations have attempted to identify the lawyers/law firms whose offices were destroyed or severely damaged. Initial grants were distributed to over 110 lawyers and law firms who lost their offices as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

Disaster Recovery Seminar

The Mississippi Bar in cooperation with the Harrison County Bar Association and the Russell Walker Blass Chapter of the American Inns of Court offered lawyers a full-day of CLE (7 credits with 1 ethics hour) to help lawyers recover from the devastating effects of losing all or part of their practices on October 8. Law office experts pooled their resources to conduct the free seminar at the Harrison County Courthouse in Gulfport.

Clearinghouse

The Mississippi Bar Center functions as the clearinghouse for information and resources for displaced lawyers and offers of assistance. The Bar ran display ads in the affected areas, where papers were still published, to notify lawyers of the Bar's relief efforts to assist and to encourage them to maintain contact with the Bar. It also encouraged those who were not affected to help others if at all possible. Additionally, the newspaper was used to notify displaced attorneys of a free Disaster Recovery Seminar on the Coast.

Katrina Relief Efforts Lawyers

Message Board

A Katrina message board has been implemented for the public and displaced lawyers to post notifications/requests and to help promote the clearinghouse for office space, furniture, computers, living accommodations, recovery and technology issues for affected lawyers. A bar employee has been assigned the task of coordinating displaced lawyer information and client requests for information concerning their lawyers in affected areas.

Bar Website Converted to Disaster Resource Center

The public needs to contact lawyers and lawyers need to contact clients, peers, the courts and the Bar. The Web site was immediately recognized as a major source to provide information to and for attorneys, and the public about relief issues addressed by the Bar, assistance from other states, other bar associations, businesses, the American Bar Association, state and federal courts, Katrina-related seminars, the Disaster Legal Assistance Hotline established by the Young Lawyers Division and other Web sites that offered Katrina Relief information. The Web site's homepage was redesigned to accommodate more in-depth articles. A Katrina Page was established for strictly Katrina-related attorney and public information. *Bar Briefs*, the weekly e-newsletter, along with intermittent blast email messages serve to communicate Katrina news and information to every member of the Bar who has email capabilities.

Office Centers

The Mississippi Bar Board of Commissioners authorized the purchase of computers, printers etc. to equip special office centers for lawyers in the Coastal counties. The offices will allow attorneys displaced by Katrina to have a place to type documents, send/receive email, do online research using Casemaker, etc. Offices are being setup in the Coast cities of Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi and Pascagoula.

Warehouse

A facility has been leased on the Coast to receive and distribute donated office equipment, furniture and other items for displaced lawyers.

Lawyers and firms have donated over \$250,000 to the Katrina Relief Lawyers Fund. However, with the great degree of devastation and the long-term effects, the Bar continues to seek donations to provide much-needed help so that lawyers, firms and the courts can as quickly as possible get back to full administration of justice for the public good.

Photographs were taken by Cheri Green, an attorney with Brunini, Grantham, Grower & Hewes in Jackson, MS. Cheri was on the Coast manning a Disaster Recovery Center Legal Assistance table.

